



SOCHI WINTER OLYMPICS: IN THE SHADOW OF TERROR

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The recent December bombings in Volgograd not only marked the sixth time that militants have attacked the city but also challenged the security concerns and preparedness of Russia for the upcoming Sochi Winter Olympics 2014. With 31 casualties and several wounded, the bombings have shown Russia as a 'soft target'. Although the attacks have not been claimed by any militant group so far, it is evident that the agenda was clearly to destabilize the smooth functioning of the games and bring humiliation and disarray to the Russian government in eye of the world audience.

However, it is important to understand the symbolic relevance of the two cities and what led to such gruesome events. The 2014 Games in Sochi in southern Russia have been a symbolic target for terrorist organizations as Sochi is located close to the "Chechen capital of Grozny which is the hotbed of extremism. The Chechen terrorist Doku Umarov, the self-proclaimed "Emir of the Caucasus" also known as "the Russian Bin Laden", made his intentions clear in a video statement in June, in which he called on his followers to "use maximum force" to put a stop to the Games. In the video he announced that, "They (Kremlin) plan to hold the Olympics on the bones of our ancestors, on the bones of many dead Muslims buried on our land by the Black Sea." By "bones of our ancestors," Umarov was referencing the ethnic cleansing of the Circassians from the Sochi area, as well as Russia's continued military domination of the region that began in the early 19th century. The most recent attacks took place two days after Islam Atiev, a close lieutenant of Umarov was killed in an anti-terrorist operation".ⁱ

Volgograd, on the other hand, lies 700 kilometers northeast of Sochi and borders the North Caucasus. “Volgograd originally was referred to as Tsaritsyn, a key southern outpost founded in the 16th century to serve as the guardian of the Volga River and a gateway to the Caucasus. It is perhaps best known for the Battle of Stalingrad (the city was renamed after the Russian dictator in 1925); one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history, resulting in 850,000 casualties and building-to-building fighting that reduced the city to rubble. The Red Army’s victory here in February 1943 turned the tide of World War II. This battle is so central to the city’s identity that last year local officials ruled that every February, Volgograd would be renamed Stalingrad for six days to commemorate the victory”.ⁱⁱ



Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/3>

Although the city has no evident strategic value as a terrorist target apart from its train station—the site of the December 29 blast—is a major transportation hub on the country's north-south rail links. “Thousands of passengers pass through the station every day, many of them traveling to and from Moscow. Other possibilities include the fact that

the city is set to serve as a host during the 2018 soccer World Cup. On the other hand, the local press viewed the attack as Muslim retaliation for Russia foiling Saudi Arabia's Syrian sponsored rebels, especially since both blasts appear coordinated and both bombs were packed with "identical" shrapnel".ⁱⁱⁱ

Volgograd has now become a prime target for militants in their demand for an Islamic state in the volatile provinces in Russia's North Caucasus. Suicide bombers have hit Volgograd three times in the last three months. "In late October, Nadia Asiyalova blew herself up on a bus, killing six. Then, on December 29, Pavel Pechenkin killed 17 in Volgograd's main train station. The next day another bomber blew up a trolleybus as it left a stop during rush hour; so far 16 people are dead. Over a hundred were wounded in the two attacks".^{iv}

"The rise of jihadist elements in the Caucasus has its genesis in conflicts that have bedeviled the region for the last 20 years commencing with the first Chechen War (1994-1996) between Russian forces and newly independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. The conflict ended in an uneasy truce but the subsequent invasion of Russian Dagestan by Chechen jihadist warlords (1999) precipitated the Second Chechen War (1999 - 2009) and the Russian military re-occupied Chechnya and restored Russian Federal control".^v The two wars against Chechen separatists in the mid-1990 and early 2000 radicalized a generation of Muslim youth in the process.

For the last 12 years, the Caucasian jihadists' have been involved in several of the most unconscionable terrorist attacks of the 21st century. While the centre of their sphere of influence is currently within the Russian territory of Dagestan, "they were involved in the attack on the Moscow Theatre in 2002, the Beslan school massacre in 2004, the suicide bombing at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport in 2011 and countless other murders and atrocities in Dagestan and Chechnya".^{vi}

Russia has been fighting separatist forces in the Caucasus region for centuries. Through such attacks in Russia, "the extremists hope to gain support from fellow Moslems in the Caucasus, curry favor with Syrian extremists and their radical sponsors, and scare

away tourists and foreign dignitaries attending this event. The region's security crisis and inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflict may also irreversibly shatter civic peace in Russia".^{vii}

The terrorist attacks in Russia have its roots inter-wined with social, political, ethnic, and territorial issues. "For its part, Russia inflicted heavy counterinsurgency blows to militant groups, including the Caucasus Emirate that waged the First and Second Chechen Wars. Although Russia triumphed in both the wars, the militants have succeeded in regularly attacking security forces and police with targeted assassinations and suicide bombings in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia".^{viii} Since 2010, several such events have occurred 500 miles of the Olympics venues which included mosques, shopping malls, and transportation hubs as its prime targets.

The decision of President Putin regarding the venue was to show to the world audience that the troubles with the Caucasus were coming under control. Despite his constant reassertions on a safe and secure conduct of the event, the twin bombings, however, showcased that the region is still tormented by Islamic extremists in Russia.

With Russian security services drawing criticism for their failure to prevent the bombings and a poor intelligence service, it is also important to note that there is also a huge penetration of small militant groups and individual terrorists with ethnic Slavs being used as suicide bombers by terrorist outfits. The emerging trend of 'black widows' as suicide bombers also pose grave danger to the security challenge of Russia in the global celebrations of the upcoming winter sports event in Sochi.

Security experts warn of the security threats by Islamist militants to stall the successful conduct of the Winter Olympics. But, for the safe and secure conduct of the games, both the International Olympic Committee and the Russian Federation have been working together

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to ensure that the best possible conditions are in place for both the athletes and the spectators. Border control is being enhanced, an air-space protection operation will also be enforced during the event, and there will even be a significant maritime security operation immediately off the Black Sea coast from downtown Sochi.

Hopefully, the game scheduled to take place from 7-23 February, will pass without an untoward instance. But, the incidents until now have achieved their objective of drawing attention to the larger issues at hand.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

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Endnotes:

- ⁱ Sean Gullory, "Why the Terrorist Chose Volgograd", 01 January, 2014, <http://nextcity.org/infrastructure/entry/why-the-terrorists-chose-volgograd>
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- ^{vi} Ibid, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-02/fergus-terrorist-threats-and-the-sochi-games/5181788>
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